

90 years since Hitler took power: A sinister anniversary

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Ninety years ago, on January 30, 1933, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed the leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), Adolf Hitler, as chancellor of the German Reich. The transfer of power to the Nazis had terrible consequences. Hitler may not have succeeded in establishing the promised 1,000-year Reich, as his reign ended after 12 years, but the crimes committed by his regime during these 12 years exceeded anything imaginable and would have been more than sufficient for 1,000 years.

Within a few months, the Nazis launched a reign of terror that combined the most modern means of propaganda with total surveillance and merciless oppression. They smashed the workers' organisations and murdered their leaders and members or put them in concentration camps set up specifically for this purpose.

They turned Germany, long regarded as a nation of culture and industrial progress, into a barbaric fighting machine. Six-and-a-half years after Hitler's appointment as Reich chancellor, his army (Wehrmacht) started World War II with the invasion of Poland. This was followed in the summer of 1941 by the meticulously planned war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, which killed 27 million Soviet citizens.

The barbarity of the Nazis reached its peak with the industrial extermination of 6 million Jews, as well as of hundreds of thousands of Sinti and Roma, who were registered, rounded up and transported to extermination camps, where they were selected for the gas chambers and incinerated with bureaucratic thoroughness.

Ten years after Hitler's coming to power, on 2 February 1943, the defeat of the Wehrmacht by the Red Army at Stalingrad marked a turning point in the war. The war now rebounded on Germany itself. Hundreds of thousands of civilians died in the Allied bombing of Germany. By the time Hitler fired a bullet through his skull on 30 April 1945 and Germany capitulated, the country was in ruins.

For many years thereafter, there was a consensus that such crimes must never be repeated. But this is no longer the case. The German government is celebrating the 90th anniversary of Hitler's rise to power by deploying German Leopard battle tanks to fight Russia. Its aim is to avenge the defeat at Stalingrad 80 years ago by escalating the war in Ukraine in

order to militarily subjugate Russia.

The NATO High Command has been "drawing up for months three regional operational plans for the entire alliance area," *Der Spiegel* reports in its latest issue. The "phonebook-thick plans with many attachments describe in detail what capabilities might be deployed at what military dimensions, from cyberspace to geographical space to naval, air and land forces." US generals are meanwhile speculating on whether the war against China—another nuclear-armed power—should begin in two or four years.

Hitler would be thrilled. He would fully support NATO's offensive and loudly applaud the order to deploy battle tanks and submarines.

The rehabilitation of Hitler in Germany began years ago. When, in the 1980s, the historian Ernst Nolte depicted Nazism as an understandable reaction to the Russian October Revolution, he was confronted with a storm of indignation in what became known as the "Historikerstreit" (Historians' Dispute).

But when, in 2014, Humboldt University Professor Jörg Baberowski rehabilitated Nolte in *Der Spiegel* and proclaimed that "Hitler was not vicious," all the outrage from the media and the political establishment was directed against the Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, SGP) for publicly criticising Baberowski. As the SGP explained at the time, the rehabilitation of Hitler was inextricably linked to the revival of German militarism.

This is now confirmed by the war in Ukraine. It has served as a pretext for the German government to launch the largest rearmament programme since Hitler. The war was deliberately provoked through NATO's relentless eastward expansion and the 2014 coup in Kiev. It is part of a violent redivision of the world between the imperialist powers, driven by the deep crisis of capitalism. The imperialists' goal is to smash Russia, divide up its immense natural resources and encircle China.

This in no way justifies the reactionary Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Putin regime embodies the interests of the Russian oligarchs, who dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991 and plundered the socialised property. NATO's offensive is the price the Russian people are now paying for the destruction of the achievements of the October Revolution of 1917. What

Hitler's tanks could not achieve in 1943, Berlin and Washington are trying to achieve with the help of NATO and its puppet in Kiev. This can be stopped only by a unified movement of the international working class.

Lessons from Hitler's rise to power

The historical lessons of Hitler's rise are of burning relevance today. Contrary to what is often claimed, he was not brought to power by a popular movement against which the defenders of democracy proved powerless. He did not have to conquer state power because it was handed to him by the political, economic and military elites.

When Hitler entered the Reich Chancellery in 1933, the democratic institutions of the Weimar Republic had long since been destroyed. For three years prior, chancellors had ruled through emergency decrees signed by the Reich president.

Hitler's NSDAP—which gathered disappointed World War I officers, petty-bourgeois layers ruined by inflation and economic depression, and other declassed elements under the banner of race and anticommunism—achieved its best election result in the summer of 1932, with 37 percent of the vote. After that, support for the party quickly disintegrated. When new Reichstag elections were held four months later, the two workers' parties, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD), received significantly more combined votes than the Nazis. The party was facing bankruptcy, and Hitler even contemplated suicide.

In this crisis, the decision was made in favor of Hitler by a small conspiratorial circle around Reich President von Hindenburg. Big business and the military signaled their approval. They did not support Hitler because they misunderstood his intentions, but because they knew exactly what he was up to.

As early as January 1932, Hitler promised top business representatives in a speech to the Düsseldorf Industry Club that he would abolish democracy, suppress the class struggle and “Bolshevism,” and conquer new Lebensraum (living space) for Germany. He reassured them that, despite occasional anti-capitalist rhetoric, the Nazis would not infringe on private property or challenge income differences among the people.

Hitler met with the leaders of the Reichswehr four days after he took over the government to clear up any lingering doubts. After introductory remarks about the importance of the “race,” he promised them an “expansion of the living space of the German people with arms in hand.” He said that as a precondition, “every subversive opinion must be suppressed in the strongest possible way,” and “Marxism must be completely destroyed.”

With their decision for Hitler, capital and the military

responded to the insoluble crisis of capitalism. Constrained in the middle of Europe, dynamic German industry could expand only through violent conquest. For this, the class struggle had to be suppressed and the workers' movement smashed.

For the same reason, fascist forces are again being promoted today. And not only in Germany, where the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) sits in parliament and dictates the government line on refugee and domestic policy. Trump's Republicans in the US and Bolsonaro's supporters in Brazil have clear fascist features. In Italy, Mussolini's heirs head the government.

The orgy of enrichment over recent years has driven class antagonisms to the breaking point. A few dozen individuals possess more wealth than the poorer half of humanity. Wealthy representatives of the middle class—the top 10 percent—have also enriched themselves. Today, they form the most important social base for militarism. By contrast, the living standards of the working class have fallen massively, working conditions are becoming increasingly unbearable, and protests and strikes are on the rise worldwide.

This is the objective basis for the fight against war and fascism. In 1933, the 13 million SPD and KPD voters could have stopped Hitler. They were ready to fight, but their leaders failed them. The SPD categorically refused to fight and instead appealed to the state and Hindenburg. Under the influence of Stalin, the KPD pursued an impotent and absurd policy. The KPD called the SPD “social fascists” and rejected a united front against the Nazis.

“The German proletariat was strong enough, both in numbers and in culture, to achieve its goal, but the leaders of the working class proved incapable,” wrote Leon Trotsky, who had fought tirelessly for a policy of the united front.

As was the case 90 years ago, only an independent, socialist movement of the international working class can stop the advance of fascism and militarism. The International Committee of the Fourth International and its German section, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, the SGP, are building the political party that can lead such a movement.



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